

LIFE IN BIBLE TIMES

Lesson 1

A general profile of the first century world

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Introduction

This 6 week journey through Life in Bible Times is built around a book by mentor, Prof. Dr. Jan van der Watt and two of his colleagues, professors Bruce Malina and Stephan Joubert, titled “Vensters wat die Woord laat oopgaan”. I’m always grateful for how God has blessed me through my mentor. My prayer is that you too will be blessed by their work, and some additional background information that was added to this study.

Socio-economical profile

In the first century, communities were largely agricultural, with 80-90% of people relying on small-scale farming to survive. Families played an essential role in this, producing food for themselves while also trading or selling small amounts of their products.

The vast majority of people were poor and illiterate—less than 10% could read or write. Wealth was concentrated in a small elite class, including aristocrats, high-ranking religious leaders, and military officials. Surrounding this elite was a slightly larger group, about 2-5% of the population, who served them in roles such as government officials, officers, legal experts, and scribes.

Cities were not developed with public infrastructure or general services in mind but existed primarily to sustain and serve this privileged few. As a result, they were often overcrowded and unsanitary. For instance, Antioch had approximately 120 people per acre, compared to modern New York City's 45 people per acre. This extreme density led to poor medical care, rampant crime, and high mortality rates.

Survival rates were bleak, especially in urban areas. Only about 40% of the population lived beyond age 16, 25% reached 26, 10% lived past 46, and a mere 3% made it to 60. Yet, despite the harsh conditions, many still chose to live in cities, seeking protection within fortified walls or hoping to sell their goods to the wealthy. However, most people lived in small rural villages.

Wars, natural disasters, heavy taxation, and lack of infrastructure in Israel forced nearly 70% of the population below the poverty line, which was set at 200 denarii per year—equivalent to 200 days' wages. Financial hardship often led people to sell their land, possessions, or even themselves into servitude as a last resort.

Not about individuals, but rather groups

Today, job interviews focus primarily on qualifications and achievements rather than family background, ethnicity, or social status. In biblical times, however, a person's lineage played a crucial role in their identity and status.

- **John 1:45, Matthew 16:17, Mark 10:35, Acts 21:39** highlight how people were often identified by their ancestry.
 - Paul, in **Philippians 3:1-6** and **2 Corinthians 11:22**, emphasized his Jewish heritage to establish his credibility.
 - Genealogies were important, especially for priests and Levites. Look at **Matthew 1:1-17** and **Luke 3:23-38**, which trace Jesus' lineage.
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The Power of Group Identity

In ancient society, a person's group determined their values and behavior. Absolute loyalty was expected—members shared resources and even risked their lives for one another. However, betraying the group or its values had serious consequences.

- **Acts 2:44-45** and **Acts 4:32-5:11** illustrate how early believers practiced radical generosity and unity.

Outsiders, on the other hand, were often viewed with suspicion. Stereotyping helped define group boundaries:

- Greeks were called *barbarians* (*barbaroi*), a term mocking their speech as strange and unintelligible.
- Pharisees dismissed those who did not strictly follow the law, referring to them as *'am ha'aretz* (people of the land) or simply "this crowd" or "other people."
- The idea that an uneducated person could not be truly pious is seen in **John 7:49, Luke 18:9-14**, and contrasted in **Acts 4:13** with the simple boldness of the apostles.
- The Mishnah, quoting Rabbi Hillel, reinforced this mindset: "An ignorant person (*'am ha'aretz*) cannot be pious."

A Radical Shift in the New Testament

With the coming of Christ, group boundaries were transformed. Faith, not ancestry, became the defining factor for belonging to God's family. Now, every outsider was a potential insider.

- **1 Thessalonians 4:9-10, Matthew 5:43-48, 1 Thessalonians 3:12** show how believers were called to love beyond traditional group lines.
 - Christians were even instructed to maintain good conduct among outsiders (**1 Peter 2:12, 3:14ff, 4:12ff; John 15:18-16:4**) and submit to governing authorities (**1 Peter 2:13-15, Romans 13:1-7**).
 - In Christ, social and ethnic divisions were erased: **Colossians 3:11, Ephesians 2:13-14**.
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Protecting Spiritual Boundaries

Though the gospel welcomed all, believers were still called to guard their faith from false teachings. Their new identity in Christ required a different kind of boundary—spiritual discernment.

- **2 John, Galatians 1:8-9** warn against allowing deception to corrupt the truth of the Gospel.
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A World of Men and Fathers

In the first century, society was largely patriarchal, with men holding authority in nearly every aspect of life. Many believed that since the "fall into sin" began with a woman, women were inherently prone to vanity, materialism, and deception. As a result, strict social expectations were placed on them—women were expected to keep their mouths, legs, and hair covered at all times. Uncovered, loose hair in public was seen as a challenge to a man's authority. Women were also discouraged from studying the Law alongside men.

While the Greek-Roman world allowed for slightly more freedom, men still maintained strict control over women. Roman philosopher Seneca stated that men were created to rule, while women were made to obey and remain silent.

For the Jews, the divine command to "be fruitful and multiply" was given to men, not women. It was their responsibility not only to continue the human race but also to maintain the family's spiritual integrity—offering sacrifices, serving in the temple, and attending the synagogue.

The Role of Fathers

This male-centered structure placed great emphasis on the role of fathers. In Jewish society, the father was the undisputed head of the household. He provided for his family, represented them in public, and was responsible for their spiritual upbringing—especially in raising sons to follow the Law. By age 12, boys were expected to join men in religious gatherings (**Luke 2:41-50**).

In the Roman world, a father's power extended even further. A Roman *paterfamilias* (father) had absolute authority over his family, even after his children were married with children of their own. Sons could not buy land or create a legal will without their father's permission. A father also had the right to reject a newborn child, ordering it to be abandoned outside the city if deemed unworthy. Children could be sold into slavery or, in extreme cases, even executed for disobedience. This power of life and death remained legal until A.D. 374, when Emperor Valentinian I abolished it.

While Jewish fathers did not hold such extreme power, they were still expected to lead with authority, protect the family's reputation, and raise their sons with strict adherence to the Law.

Women and Children in the First Century

A wife's place was in the home, and she was expected to be seen in public as little as possible. When she did go out—whether to the temple to pray or to buy and trade goods—she was to remain covered and avoid busy times, especially at the temple. Crowded hours were when unveiled women were often present, making it inappropriate for a respectable wife to be out.

- **John 4:6-7, 17-18**

At home, women managed household duties, including cooking, raising children, and overseeing daily domestic tasks. When their sons married, it became their responsibility to teach their daughters-in-law the customs and expectations of their new family.

- **Luke 4:38-39**
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The Value of Sons and Daughters

Sons were considered far more important than daughters. A daughter's greatest virtue was her sexual purity, as only a virgin could secure a good husband. To protect their daughters from temptation and ensure their future, mothers kept them out of public life as much as possible.

Sons, on the other hand, were actively trained to represent the family well. As they grew older, they accompanied their fathers in public to learn social and familial responsibilities. After marriage, sons typically remained with their parents and were expected to care for them in old age.

Public and Private Spaces in the First Century

Public and private spaces were treated very differently, especially regarding women. In public, women were expected to be veiled and speak as little as possible. However, in the privacy of their homes, they had more freedom to speak and remove their veils. Some larger homes even had a designated *women's court*, reserved for female family members (**Luke 8:3**).

This distinction becomes particularly significant when examining the early church. Christian gatherings began to take place in homes (**1 Corinthians 16:19, Romans 16:5, Acts 20:8**), creating a unique overlap between public and private spaces. While home settings had their own rules, these gatherings also introduced elements of public engagement, as outsiders could enter at any time (**1 Corinthians 14:23**). This dynamic is reflected in Paul's instructions about women's roles in worship (**1 Corinthians 11:2-16, 14:33-36**).

However, a cultural shift was taking place. Women were beginning to speak publicly in Christian gatherings (**1 Corinthians 11:5, Acts 2:18, Acts 21:9**), and Jesus himself encouraged women to learn alongside men (**Luke 10:39-42**). These changes marked a significant transformation in societal norms, redefining the role of women in both public and private life.

Honor and Shame in the First Century

Today, money drives much of our decision-making—whether it’s choosing a job, determining productivity, or deciding where to spend our time and energy. Economic factors shape behavior and priorities.

In the first century, however, society revolved around **honor and shame** rather than wealth. People worked not to accumulate possessions but to protect their inherited position within the community. Those who actively sought wealth were often viewed with suspicion—were they prioritizing personal gain over group values? **Honor** was the true currency: how others perceived you in relation to your group and how your group viewed you in return.

Shame was also a valuable concept. A person with shame was seen as someone who cared about their public reputation—especially for women, who were expected to guard their dignity carefully. Losing shame was a serious matter.

The Consequences of Dishonor

Failing to uphold the customs and values of one’s group resulted in a loss of honor, often leading to punishment or even expulsion. A dishonored individual could be labeled a fool, a sinner, or a heathen, ultimately facing social exclusion—a kind of “death” in a world where survival depended on community ties.

Men inherently had more honor than women, as honor was linked to gender. Being born into an honorable family or tribe provided a lifelong advantage (**Philippians 3:5**), while being born into a dishonorable status could be a severe disadvantage (**Deuteronomy 23:2-4**).

Gaining and Bestowing Honor

Honor was a limited commodity—if one person gained it, another lost it. The most powerful figures, such as kings, emperors, or even deities, were seen as having an abundance of honor, allowing them to bestow it on others. For this reason, receiving Roman citizenship from Caesar was a great honor.

Honor could also be won or lost through **public interactions**, especially debates and challenges. Engaging well in such exchanges brought honor to both the individual and their group, while failure resulted in loss. This is why religious leaders frequently challenged Jesus in public—to test and discredit him. One chapter alone, **Matthew 22:15-46**, contains multiple examples of such confrontations.